

PRACTICE PROFILE



Pippa Nissen & Jim Richards

Nissen Richards Studio

Since establishing their ‘wife and husband’-led practice in 2010, Pippa Nissen and Jim Richards have cemented a reputation for translating narrative into spatial experience. Kim Neville spoke to them about their creativity, collaboration and continual learning.

Nissen Richards Studio was founded in 2010 by Pippa Nissen, joined soon after by her husband, Jim Richards. The goal was to work on projects they genuinely cared about – and were passionate about. Both founders brought extensive experience from having run other architectural practices. As Nissen explains: “Both of us had been directors of other practices before, so we had experience of running companies. I took the plunge first and Jim followed quickly after when I asked him politely to join me (he said yes immediately!).”

The duo brought complementary interests to the new practice. Nissen’s background was rooted in architecture and theatre design, while Jim was keen to work across a diverse range of projects. Reflecting on his ambitions for the studio, he states: “I wanted to work on a wide mix of projects at different scales of size and complexity, but ones that would also push us both intellectually and technically.”

Nissen’s cultural and creative interests were shaped through her education, having studied architecture at Cambridge before

completing a postgraduate Master’s degree in Theatre Design at the Slade School of Fine Art. This combination of architectural and theatrical training would later influence the studio’s strategy to pursue cultural and public projects.

When the practice was first established, the studio consisted of just six people. Since then, it has grown organically in response to the opportunities it has been presented with. Reflecting on this, Nissen notes: “At first, we wanted to create something small and bespoke, but the opportunities we were given drove us to expand. I think now we feel we are at a size that feels really good – just under 30 people.”

Currently, the studio is in a happy position where they can say ‘no’ if projects don’t align with their ethos, or the workload prevents it. Nissen says: “It does mean that we love all the projects we do take on though, which is a good place to be!”

Practice culture & ethos

Richards pinpoints the practice’s key design objective as “honesty



BURYING THE COMPETITION

A new ‘visitor experience’ at the Sutton Hoo Anglo-Saxon burial ground combined both exhibition and visitor needs carefully, picking up an RIBA award

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PORTRAIT DETAIL

The practice's refurbishment of the National Portrait Gallery showcased iterative detail

of materials," and more pragmatically, "consideration of construction." Nissen expands on the approach, explaining that it is fundamentally about creating work that enhances people's lives. She continues, "I liken the design process to creating a piece of music, where there is phrasing, rhythm and pacing, a complex series of events that communicates ideas and has meaning."

A key aspect of the studio's approach is the translation of narrative into spatial experience. For Nissen, this is a considered and iterative process: "We make sure to start slowly! It takes time to shape and create an 'experience'. We try and plot experience into a timeline and then test and plan what goes where." She adds: "Workshops and meetings help us this process."

For Richards, narrative is embedded across all aspects of the practice's work, extending beyond individual projects to the broader role of architecture itself. He says: "The translation of narrative runs through all our work, and we are also interested in our architectural work in how spaces can become a backdrop to people's lives, sparking memory and evoking meaning."

A culture of learning and development is central to the studio's wider ethos. The practice supports work experience placements for students from secondary school through to Master's level, and staff also organise a range of CPD programmes covering a broad spectrum of sectors.

This is managed internally, as is the practice's mentoring strategy. Nissen explains: "We have a loose hierarchy so that people are mentored by someone with more experience who has more of an overview." This approach is complemented by more formal training. Nissen continues: "For example, two members of the team went to the theatre company Punchdrunk for a workshop to explore theatrical design processes. We enjoy learning."

A culture of continuous learning is embedded within the practice, informed by Nissen's own academic work; she has taught at university level for more than 20 years.

Design approach

A commitment to humility, openness, and continual learning underpins the design method of Nissen Richards Studio. As Nissen

explains: "We test out all our ideas on the relevant audience sectors to find out where our ideas work and where anything might feel clumsy. Engaging with different audiences and being open, humble and ready to learn are key parts of the process." This iterative and audience-focused methodology allows the practice to evaluate and refine design proposals while ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered throughout the process.

Richards emphasises the importance of communication, arguing that maintaining an open dialogue and encouraging constructive debate are essential to addressing ethical and cultural responsibilities within their work. Through collaboration and critical discussion, the studio seeks to create designs that are both inclusive and socially responsive.

Sustainability is also a central consideration within the practice. Like many contemporary architectural firms, the studio carefully evaluates whether new construction is necessary, prioritising the retention, adaptation, and reuse of existing buildings and materials wherever possible. Material selection forms a key aspect of this strategy. As Nissen states: "We also think about how everything that we design can have a further life within future projects. As well as moving away from materials such as plastic to things that can be reused or recycled, we additionally propose the use of very high-quality materials which are robustly durable and long-lasting." This approach reflects the studio's commitment to reducing environmental impact through circular design principles, material reuse, and the specification of durable, sustainable materials.

Additionally, Richards continues, "In recent projects, especially in the residential sector, we have also engaged with embodied carbon specialists who work alongside our established energy and sustainability consultants to provide a more joined up approach."

The studio also actively seeks to broaden its perspective beyond individual projects through its separate platform, A Museum For Now. Nissen explains further: "We also run a separate website for ideas and discussion, where museum professionals, alongside artists (of the calibre of Jeremy Deller and Rachel Whiteread), share their insights, which ensures that our perspective is always as broad as possible."

This exchange of ideas in turn informs the practice's wider design process. The studio regularly undertakes workshops with clients and collaborators to test and refine design proposals. As Nissen explains: "On specific projects, we hold workshops where we test different approaches and then whittle down our ideas until we have a single approach. We explore different options for delivery too, towards achieving the same result."

Physical and digital modelling also plays an important role in developing and communicating proposals. Nissen continues: "To test ideas out, we work carefully with both 3D physical and digital models, exploring many different ways of representing things to make sure that everything really is as people imagine and nothing is left to chance."

Recent projects

Several recent projects exemplify the company narrative-led approach to design. Sutton Hoo, the Anglo-Saxon burial ground in Suffolk, is a benchmark project for the practice, where the team was able to combine architecture and visitor experience through a strong narrative thread across the whole site. Significantly, the interpretation strategy informed wider architectural decisions, with the interpretation concept leading decision-making on the



MODEL CONSULTANTS

The National Portrait Gallery refurb saw Nissen Richards creating a 3D model to test “positioning and object clusters” in advance of designing

larger architectural interventions. This included the design of a new viewing tower, enabling visitors to experience the landscape from “a new and different perspective.”

The studio’s refurbishment of the National Portrait Gallery similarly demonstrates the iterative and highly detailed design process. As Interpretation and Permanent Exhibition Designers, the team developed a 3D model of the scheme, which Nissen explains allowed them to test “positioning and object clusters” before undertaking extensive onsite testing of colours, materials and content locations. This process ensured that the intended narrative translated successfully into the completed visitor experience.

Technology & AI

While acknowledging the growing influence of AI within the profession, the firm remains measured in its approach. Nissen describes the practice as “open but cautious about AI,” viewing it primarily as a tool for improving efficiency rather than generating design solutions. The studio is currently exploring how AI can support administrative and technical processes, helping to replace “mundane tasks” while also allowing teams to test options quickly. However, Nissen emphasises that AI should only ever augment, rather than replace, professional expertise.

Recognition & achievements

Recognition through awards has played an important role in the growth and development of the practice. Richards describes Sutton Hoo’s recognition as a national RIBA award winner as “a watershed moment for the practice”, representing acknowledgement of the studio’s work at a national level. Although the project did not make the Stirling Prize shortlist, it was later identified by a public vote as the ‘alternative Stirling Prize’ winner.

Since then, the practice has continued to build on this success, having twice been shortlisted for the Stirling Prize as part of wider exhibition and gallery design teams. Collectively, the studio has now picked up over 50 creative awards, which according to Nissen gives both the practice and its clients “a real boost.”

For Nissen personally, being named as one of the *Architect’s*

Journal’s ‘40 Under 40’ architects early in her career proved particularly significant. She explains that the recognition “gave me the courage of my convictions to disband my last practice and go ahead and form Nissen Richards Studio with a view to really shaping the work that we did.”

Future moves

Like many architectural practices, the studio continues to navigate a number of industry-wide challenges. Richards points to the increasingly complex planning system, saying it is “very slow and frustrating,” and delays can often be difficult to explain to clients.

Commercial pressures also present ongoing challenges. Nissen identifies maintaining healthy cashflow as a key concern, observing that clients are becoming increasingly slow to pay while project budgets continue to tighten. Nevertheless, she suggests that these constraints are partially offset by the industry’s move towards more sustainable approaches, requiring practices to become increasingly imaginative and resourceful.

Sustainability will play an increasingly important role in shaping the practice. Richards explains that the inclusion of zero carbon approaches across all sectors is something the studio is ‘fully embracing’, citing the completion of its first zero carbon housing scheme as an important milestone and learning opportunity.

They also believe that the profession must become increasingly human-centred, in response to advances in artificial intelligence. She argues that architects should be “more human centric – not less,” continuing to guide clients through the design process while demonstrating the value of thoughtful, bespoke design. Within exhibition design, she similarly advocates creating spaces that are accessible, inclusive and encourage a sense of ownership among visitors. Both sides of this wife-husband team express a desire to continue expanding the breadth of the practice.

To find out more about ‘A Museum For Now’, please scan the QR Code.

